



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service (EAS)

# THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686

Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. My employee takes feedback as a personal attack. I don't see this as a performance issue, but it prevents constructive discussions in correcting his work. Is a referral to EAS appropriate if his performance is otherwise excellent?

A. If your employee is unwilling to accept feedback in an appropriate manner, and as a result you cannot adequately correct his work, then he has a performance problem. It is not unusual for a performance evaluation to measure how well an employee accepts constructive feedback. Even if your employee has excellent job skills, the give and take in communication, and willingness to work with a supervisor or evaluator by welcoming and accepting feedback can be considered an essential function. Making a supervisor referral to EAS, your EAP (Employee Assistance Program) is appropriate. You need to let him know that his inadequate response to constructive feedback is a performance problem. Not doing so would send a message that his attitude is not an issue, and minimize the seriousness of the problems. It would also preclude your ability to base the supervisor referral on a legitimate performance issue.

■ Q. An employee who was referred to the EAP, and then went to treatment for alcoholism is drinking again. She is also coming in late. I feel deceived by her relapse. Is my reaction unusual? I would like to confront her.

A. Your reaction to your employee's relapse is not unusual, but the most appropriate response is to refer her back to the EAP based upon her recurring tardiness. Your employee's relapse and response afterward contributes to the feeling of deception that you are experiencing, but it is a normal part of the disease process. Denial or secrecy typically accompany relapse. Avoid discussing her drinking or the relapse. Employees who relapse may or may not be remorseful, and if confronted, she may act like nothing happened, or insist that her recovery is still intact. A discussion about the relapse is an issue for the EAP. You could not rely upon her statements or denial concerning the relapse no matter how convincing. Do not sympathize with your employee, but instead hold her accountable and responsible for satisfactory attendance and performance. Recovery is still possible for your employee, but accountability is a proven gateway to employees achieving it.

■ Q. My employee manages a small work unit. Its success is the result of his aggressive personality style and self-interest. He has not earned much respect among those who work for him. He gets the work out, so should I be concerned, and does the EAP have a role?

A. It is unlikely that the work unit your employee manages maximizes its productivity with the supervision style you describe. This means that you have reason to be concerned about the supervisor's effect on employees and their performance. Addressing your concerns and explaining the changes you believe necessary is the place to start, but an EAP referral can be helpful. Supervisors with habits of aggression and intimidation may struggle with change. They may recognize their problem and its consequences, but defend it to avoid facing difficult personal issues or painful insight that would help explain their behavior. Willful attempts to change frequently fail or cause more problems if employees experience the supervisor as aggressive one day, and compassionate and nurturing the next. With adequate documentation, the EAP will be able to help your supervisor examine his supervision style and develop a plan for making changes helpful to the work unit.

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■ Q. My supervisor has asked me to resolve conduct problems among my employees. Customer complaints about services they provide prompted this action. Unfortunately, the complaints include me, so how do I intervene? Is my credibility shot?

A. Although you participated in and condoned these unacceptable behaviors, your credibility is partly derived from the responsibility of your position and management's directive to have the behavior stop. It is important to meet with your employees and establish a new relationship with them, one that admits to the past but insists on change going forward. Your participation in the questionable behavior can't be an excuse not to intervene if it happens again. Responding to management's concern is important, but it may also be helpful to examine the boundaries, values, and nature of the relationships you have with your employees. There may be important fundamental changes for you to consider. The EAP can help. Services dealing with job stress and burnout could be one suggestion. Such a self-searching exercise may not be easy, but it may prevent future occurrences that could produce more severe consequences.

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■ Q. My employee used all of her sick leave this year, but has accumulated the maximum amount of time for vacation leave. Can I accuse her of sick leave abuse? Is there a basis for an EAP referral? Her use of sick leave does not exceed the amount allowed.

A. You must know your agency policy, or contract if applicable, with regard to leave programs or seek guidance from your agency's human resource consultant before you can determine how to act. When sick leave and vacation leave are offered by the organization as separate programs, the leave pattern you describe may indicate a problem. This is because sick leave is normally viewed as a benefit granted by the employer to allow employees to build a reserve of days they can use for extended illnesses. It is not viewed as an entitlement to the same degree as accumulated vacation leave. The abuse of sick leave therefore is seen as an abuse of the employer's good will, in addition to its impact on productivity. It is therefore appropriate to make an EAP referral. Always seek guidance from your Human Resource Consultant.

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**NOTES:**

Visit EAS on our website at:  
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

